

VERY HUMAN, VERY DIVINE (X): *I will follow you wherever you go*

At the doorway of Simon Peter's house, Jesus has just healed a great number of sick people and cast out many demons. When the time comes to cross to the other side of the lake, a scribe, perhaps dazzled by all these wonders, comes up to Him and says: *Teacher, I will follow you wherever you go (Mt 8:19)*. What were the real intentions in this man's heart? To what extent did he accept what it meant to follow the Master? We only know Jesus' answer: *Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head (Mt 8:20)*.

While at first glance these words may seem harsh, able to deflate anyone, it all depends on what the scribe was looking for in Christ. The apostles had heard similar responses. But rather than a warning or a restraint, they had discovered in them an invitation. We can understand, then, why Peter, John and James *left everything* when Jesus called them at the end of their day's work (cf. *Lk 5:11*); or why Matthew did the same when our Lord came to seek him while he was collecting taxes (cf. *Lk 5:18*). The apostles realise that, although having *nowhere to lay one's head* may involve a lot of sacrifice, everything is little compared to the joy of a life with Jesus.

Hence our Lord speaks clearly. He doesn't want this man to deceive himself, perhaps thinking that he is undertaking a life where everything will always go smoothly. For journeying alongside Jesus can often entail unwelcome hardships: the experience of tiredness, confronting our own or other people's defects, lack of appreciation, misunderstandings... It is then that the virtue of fortitude, raised by divine grace, proves decisive; it gives us the strength needed to overcome any obstacle in striving to follow Jesus "wherever He goes."

An affectivity always oriented towards God

"Happiness in heaven is for those who know how to be happy on earth,"¹ Saint Josemaría used to say. In our daily life we find many things that give us joy, but also adversities that put us to the test. It is only natural, then, that our happiness on earth has a lot to do with learning to cope with these difficulties, these days when almost nothing goes according to plan. This is where fortitude comes in, because it transforms obstacles into opportunities to once again direct our deepest desires in the right direction: towards God. Fortitude shapes our affectivity so that we are "more affected" by God than by personal or external circumstances, which can always change.

Things not essential for happiness may sometimes appear to us as indispensable. This can happen with certain comforts that are almost commonplace today; but it can also happen with other needs that we may create for ourselves, almost without realising it. Apart from being aware of such a dependency, we want to be free enough so that external circumstances do not make decisions for us. For example, so that a trying moment doesn't rob us of our smile; so that tiredness doesn't overcome us so quickly; or so that we are able to renounce a personal liking for what someone else likes. Fortitude makes us less dependent on anything that is not God's love, so that we can be happy among all kinds of people, in any place, and while engaged in any task.

Thus when the crowds, enthused by his miracles, wanted to proclaim Him king, Jesus "was

¹ Saint Josemaría, *The Forge*, 1005.

detached from triumphalism: he was free. As in the desert, when he rejected Satan's temptations because he was free, and his freedom was to follow the will of the Father. Let us reflect today on our freedom. Am I free, or am I a slave to my passions, to my ambitions, to riches, to fashion?"² Saint Paul passes on to us his own experience: *I have learned in whatever situation I am, to be content. I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me (Phil 4:11-13)*. For the Apostle nothing is an obstacle on his way to what he really wants: to love God with all his heart.

The greatest good is sometimes the least obvious

We only need to look at the world with realism to recognise the need for fortitude. We see how circumstances, whether advantageous or adverse, influence us. We realise the need to get through certain difficult periods without becoming despondent or losing our composure. We also know from our own experience that what is of value requires effort and patience: from tackling a tough subject at school or overcoming a character flaw, to nurturing deep relationships with others or growing in friendship with God. Yet, although common sense makes this clear, not infrequently our vision can go awry and we are left with a narrow view of fortitude: as if it were simply a tiresome effort of going against the grain.

Nevertheless, fortitude is not a tedious exercise of the will in order to overcome ourselves, striving not to complain, to deny ourselves or fight against what we don't want or don't understand. To see it in this way would exhaust anyone. To be strong consists rather in strengthening our convictions, in always renewing the love that moves us, in making the most authentic goods shine forth more brightly in our life. Then we will choose ever more easily, even happily, what deep down we really want: that *better part* of which Jesus speaks (cf. *Lk 10:42*).

Let us look at an example here. Someone who lacks fortitude may not be able to avoid a sharp remark or find it hard to smile when tired. In such situations, fatigue is what weighs most heavily on one's reactions or decisions, and leads one to lose sight of why it might be worthwhile to make an effort. In contrast, those who have strengthened the virtue of fortitude in themselves are not only able to overcome fatigue, but to do so because they perceive the good it does them and others, and even discover there a way to love God. Only thus do actions such as depriving oneself of a small pleasure, getting up at a fixed time, not complaining or doing a favour we wouldn't spontaneously do, become a way of training ourselves in the perception of a greater but perhaps less obvious good, at least at the beginning.

This process, in which we might see only the challenge of overcoming ourselves, ends up making us freer, as our joy and peace will depend more on what we truly want, and less on the petty tyrannies of the moment, whether external or internal. The struggle to grow in fortitude is precisely about exploring these blind spots that prevent us from seeing some aspects of the good, simply because they require effort. Those who learn to live with fortitude will be able to persevere in striving for the good when right decisions are not the most attractive ones. Being strong is the attitude of someone who perceives the true value of things.

² Pope Francis, Homily, 13 April 2018.

Attaining freedom in daily life

When we hear Jesus tell the scribe that he has *nowhere to lay his head*, we might also think that He is trying to test him: “To follow me isn’t easy: are you sure you can do this?” However, we find other Gospel passages in which our Lord expresses himself in a similar way, and does so not as a warning, but (as we see in the calling of several of the apostles) as an invitation: *If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me (Lk 9:23). Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many (Mt 7:13)*. In no case are these calls to meaningless suffering, but to the development of a great freedom. Thus, little by little, there grows in our heart the readiness to “love to the end,” as He himself did.

“To be happy, what you need is not an easy life but a heart in love.”³ A Christian’s path is demanding because it requires an ever deeper love. As a traditional song says, “let a heart unwilling to suffer spend its whole life free of love.”⁴ Jesus’ life shows us how we should confront adversity and pain. His fortitude is not that of someone who builds up walls to cut himself off from reality, or who hides behind armour to avoid being wounded. For neither walls nor armour strengthen our character. Rather they cut us off from the real world. Their rigidity makes it impossible for someone to attain real freedom.

Jesus’ fortitude, in contrast, is in constant dialogue with his surroundings. Jesus doesn’t accept suffering just because it is arduous, or to prove himself or to prove something to us. He accepts it only when it is necessary to do so, without allowing it to overcome Him. He sees in hardships a meaning that underlies everything in his life, rather than as something absurd. This is what loving the world passionately means in the fullest sense. To truly love the world means to be able to relate to it in all its richness, including the hidden value of the imperfect, in all of life’s situations, in ourselves and in others. If we strive to attain Christ’s fortitude, we will be more sensitive and deeper, immersed more fully in reality, more capable of finding God in everything. In short, more contemplative.

Patience to reach the end

We rejoice in the hope of the glory of God, writes Saint Paul. *We rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us (Rom 5:2-5)*. Every sacrifice freely made, every hardship accepted without rebellion, every self-conquest done for love, strengthens in us the conviction that our true happiness is found only in God. Our daily struggle then becomes a progressive conquest of the true good and grants us a taste of the future glory we aspire to: our struggle becomes a path of hope.

Habitually seeking the true good hidden in our decisions gives us the strength not to settle for the immediate and ephemeral. And this produces endurance, patience. Our hope is placed ever more fully in the Love that will never fail, that gives meaning to all our efforts. That is why the strong

³ Saint Josemaría, *Furrow*, 795.

⁴ *A los árboles altos* (“To the tall trees”), a traditional Spanish song.

person does not lose serenity in the face of failure or when the fruit is slow to appear. Patience is neither naive optimism nor resignation; it is the attitude of the free person whose love is unfailing, and whose sight is always set on the goal. The deep determination to never settle for anything less than the happiness of heaven can sustain our daily struggle to follow Jesus “wherever he goes.” That is fortitude. A strong heart, always fixed on the goal, can “struggle for Love until the last instant.”⁵

⁵ Saint Josemaría, “Time for reparation,” in *In Dialogue with the Lord*, p. 138, Scepter (London-New York), 2018.